

Family Team Meetings: Guidance for Facilitators During Physical Distancing

Though in-person participation in family team meetings is preferred, current circumstances may necessitate remote meetings. This guidance can help child welfare agencies and family team meeting facilitators adhere to local recommendations while still using best practices for family team meetings. It is not intended to replace local policy, protocols, or guidance.

Prepare to Connect

Before starting a meeting, have all the logistical pieces in place. If you are working from home, establish a quiet work space where you can protect the client family's privacy. Reach out to all meeting participants ahead of time and determine their capacity for technology options as described below.

- **Use video conferencing if possible.** Use video conferencing software like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or GoToMeeting to support visual connections to participants. Share your screen if a presentation and/or charting is occurring.
- **Use video chat alternatives if necessary.** You can also use video chat platforms like Skype, WhatsApp, Google Duo, or FaceTime.
- **Consider conference calling as a backup.** It is best to use conference calling in combination with web-based video technology; however, when that is not feasible, it can be used alone.

Troubleshoot

At least a day before the meeting, test and troubleshoot any technology you will be using.



- Test web conferencing connections and Wi-Fi availability. Ensure the primary facilitator understands how to use the technology.
- Test audio and microphones. Confirm that equipment is charged and functioning. Determine whether speakers are of adequate quality and in the best location to maximize sound quality and participation. Consider using headphones to minimize audio feedback.
- Ensure connection and extension cords are accessible.
- Be prepared to offer backup technology options if any participants experience technical difficulties during the meeting.



Share Documents

Before the meeting, provide any documents and/or visuals. For remote participants, mail or email these ahead of time.

Preparing the Participants

Preparation goes a long way in setting up the meeting for successful dialogue despite not being in the same room together and can help minimize distractions during the meeting.

- **Provide guidance on logistics.** The worker or supervisor should tell family members what the meeting will be like. They should describe the meeting's purpose and desired outcome, share logistics, and explain any documents. A designated staff person should do the same for other meeting participants.
- **Ensure safety and court order compliance.** The worker or supervisor should discuss any court orders or safety concerns about the remote location with parents and/or youth and

take appropriate precautions. Be sure to ask clients the following questions ahead of time.

- » Are there any court orders in effect that prohibit contact between any meeting participants?
- » Do you have any worries about your personal safety or that of anyone else who will be participating in the meeting?
- » Is there anything else that you feel you need in order to have a safe meeting?
- » Note: If a parent or youth is participating remotely, be aware that they may not be alone or in a private area for the meeting. This limits the ability to manage safety and the unintended or inappropriate sharing of information. Precautions to address this could include but are not limited to (1) conducting separate meetings or calls with particular parents or youth or (2) supporting a remote participant in changing where they are participating in the meeting to help increase safety.

- **Ensure family supports/network members can participate.** The worker should ask family members who else from their network and community partners they would like to be present. Consult with support persons ahead of time to determine any special considerations that may affect their ability to participate. This includes assessing their technology needs and co-creating solutions for phone or web participation. Also consider ideas such as the need for separate meetings, language barriers, cognitive or mental health needs, and cultural preferences.

Facilitating the Meeting

Remote family team meetings require additional planning and facilitation strategies to ensure

everyone can participate, remain engaged, and achieve the meeting goals.

- **Be timely.** Calling in a timely manner is imperative, as late calls can be very disruptive to the meeting.
 - » Have the call or video conference set up and available at least 10 minutes before the start of the meeting.
 - » Listen for participants as they join, acknowledge them, and let them know when the meeting will begin and who else is on the call. Also let them know that full introductions will take place once all have arrived.
 - » If participants call in after 15 minutes, only minimally summarize the discussion. (Make exceptions for parents and youth.)
- **Create group agreements.** To help facilitate remote conversation, include a group agreement that the facilitator will pause frequently and check in with group members to ensure all participants have a chance to speak. Also consider the following additional group agreements.
 - » We will mute our phones when not speaking.
 - » We will identify ourselves before speaking.
 - » We will do our best to not interrupt one another.
 - » We will give our undivided attention to the meeting.
 - » We will be patient, as there may be audio delays due to the phone or Wi-Fi connection.
 - » We will make a plan about what the group will do if someone inadvertently drops off the call.

- » We agree on how “virtual breaks” will be handled if they are needed.

- **Use explicit facilitation.**

- » Establish a list of remote participants and share with all. If the call is on video and the platform does not include names with each video feed, creating a list of the names to share in a chat box can help.
- » At the beginning of the meeting, review the purpose and agenda. If some participants are on the phone, acknowledge that not being able to see nonverbal cues will require everyone to participate differently. Explain that the facilitator will pause and ask them to share their thoughts more often.
- » Follow your existing meeting structure (e.g., Team Decision Making, family group conference, Permanency Round Table). If your meeting does not have a specific structure, using these three questions can help provide structure for the discussion: What are we worried about? What is working well? What needs to happen next?
- » Use solution-focused questions to engage participants and gather more detailed information throughout the meeting.
- » Before moving on to another stage, ensure you have invited all participants to speak.
- » Summarize the discussed information frequently and check for understanding.
- » Speak clearly and evenly. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and idioms.
- » If multiple participants are together in one room, remind them to avoid side conversations, as this excludes participants in other locations.



- **Review next steps.** At the end of the meeting, make sure all participants have a clear understanding of next steps. Designate the person responsible for sharing the meeting notes after the meeting.
- **Capture all participants' type of participation.** Notify remote participants that you are including their names and noting on all documents that they joined the meeting via phone or video.

After the Meeting

- **Share notes with all participants.** Within 24 hours of the meeting, provide a copy of the meeting notes to all participants (e.g., hand deliver, email, scan, fax, mail).
- **Follow up.** The worker should follow up after the meeting to check in with the parents and/or youth to answer any pending questions and continue services.

Family team meetings, even if they have to be conducted remotely, are a critical way to share information and to ensure the family's voice and choices are present in case practice. Jurisdictions are strongly encouraged to continue this important practice, even in the challenging context of physical distancing. The NCCD Children's Research Center is here to support your practice; please reach out anytime.